



# Revenge *Is a* Dish Best Served Piping Hot Coal-Fired *From a* Oven.

Patsy Grimaldi, the 81-year-old New York pizza legend, is getting his good name back the only way he can.

By JANE BLACK

CHRISTENING A RESTAURANT is never simple. But the question of what Patsy Grimaldi would call his new pizzeria was further complicated by the fact that he was legally barred from following the long-standing tradition of just naming it after himself. He couldn't call it Patsy's—he had called an earlier place that and been sued by the restau-

rateur who owned the rights to that name. Nor could he call it Grimaldi's. For business purposes, his last name belongs to one Frank Ciolli, to whom he sold his iconic pizzeria under the Brooklyn Bridge in 1998. In the end, the 81-year-old chose to call the place Juliana's, after his mother. It helped that the trademark was unclaimed. ¶ If neither Patsy nor

Grimaldi could be on the sign, Patsy Grimaldi was determined to put his stamp on the food. One morning earlier this month, he stood at the marble counter in front of Juliana's refurbished coal-fired oven, auditioning two pizzaioli. Both were clearly nervous. And Patsy wasn't making it easy. He didn't like the way Jose Martinez, a 35-year-old with ten years of experience, threw flour on the board—Patsy showed him how to flick his wrist so it settled like a delicate layer of snow. He didn't like the way 23-year-old Vinny Amato patted the dough—use your fingertips, not your palms—or the way he lifted it off the counter to stretch it with his fists; any true pizza man knows that will make the center too thin. "You get it?" Patsy asked as his fingers flew, nimbly caressing ("like a woman," he used to say) a lump of dough into a perfect round. Then, perhaps realizing that he had to hire *someone* if Juliana's were to open by the end of the month as planned, he added, "I know you are both professionals. But you have to do it my way."

The prospect of pies done Patsy's way—blister-edged discs topped with ingredients like fragrant tomatoes and his wife Carol's homemade mozzarella—has had pizza geeks salivating since word first leaked last winter that the maestro was returning after nearly fifteen years in retirement. That Patsy would be serving his pies at 19 Old Fulton Street, the very spot on the Brooklyn waterfront where he and Carol had opened more than twenty years ago, would make them taste even better. But Patsy's big comeback has been fraught. Ciolli, who continued to operate Grimaldi's at 19 Old Fulton until this past December, when he was forced to move a few doors down after a bitter dispute with the landlord, has taken Patsy and Carol to court. Juliana's, he claims in an affidavit filed last month, could slash his business by 30 percent or more. Patsy and Carol, he al-

leges, are trying to "steal back the very business they earlier sold to me."

For Patsy, Juliana's is more than just a swan song. "It's a classic, almost Sicilian thing," says Ed Levine, the editor-in-chief of the food blog Serious Eats and the author of *Pizza: A Slice of Heaven*. "This is about one thing: getting his good name back." Even if the name he has to use to restore his legacy isn't his own.

**NEVER BEFORE HAS** the city been the pizza wonderland it is today. You find great pies in Bushwick, the Village, Hell's Kitchen—even midtown! And you can indulge in a kaleidoscope of styles. There are Sicilian slices at Di Fara; wood-fired Neapolitan pies with soupy centers at Franny's and Motorino; Roman pies with their crackerlike crusts at Campo De' Fiori; fried, lumpy, but delicious blobs called montanaras at Forcella and PizzArte. Sometimes it's hard to remember that less than ten years ago—what the *New York Times*' Frank Bruni once called "less self-conscious pizza times"—good pizza in New York meant only one thing: a coal-fired pie.

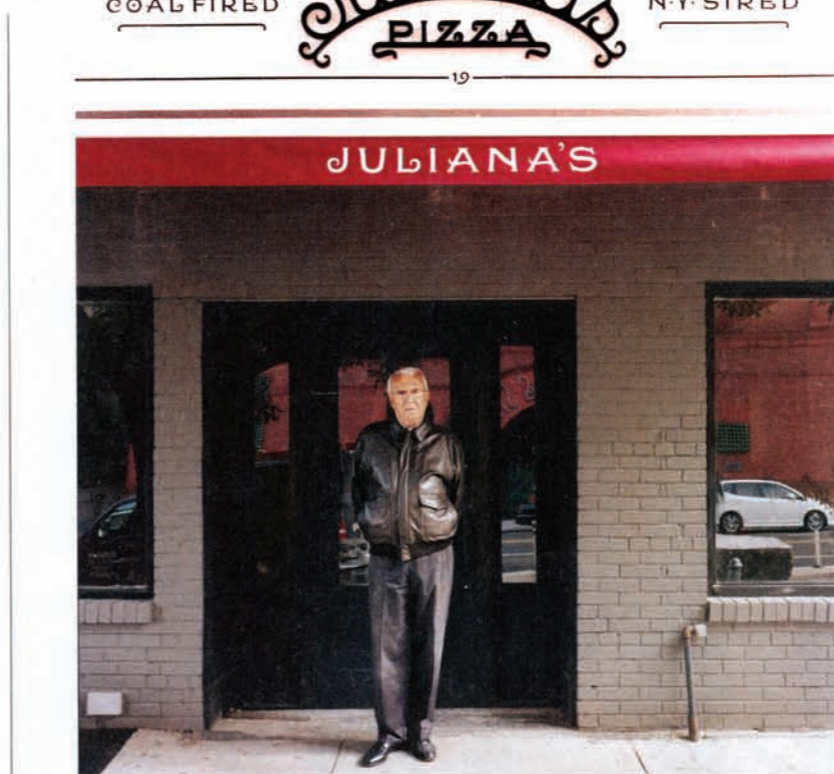
According to lore, pizza made its debut in New York in 1905, when the Neapolitan immigrant Gennaro Lombardi began using leftover bread dough to make pizza at his grocery store in Little Italy. The pies were cooked in coal-fired ovens, not out of any culinary pretension but because that was the technology of the day. The result was a pizza with a crust that was neither too thick nor too thin, a slightly charred bottom that lent a subtle smokiness, and distinct islands of sauce and fresh-pulled mozzarella.

The original Lombardi's closed in the early eighties (a spinoff still operates in Noho), but not before giving root to New York's three other great pizza families. Anthony Pero, who opened Totunno's in Coney Island in 1924, worked there. So did John Sasso, who started John's in 1929, and Patsy

Lancieri, who opened Patsy's in East Harlem in 1933. To a casual observer, their pies might have seemed interchangeable. But the four families have long defended their turf with the same ferocity of those other famous New York families (minus the violence and illegal sidelines). Louise "Cookie" Ciminieri, Anthony Pero's granddaughter, still runs Totunno's in Coney Island. She refuses to tell customers what goes into her sauce or whether there's a touch of Romano cheese sprinkled on her pies. (Survey says? There is!) And she certainly would never deign to taste someone else's pie. "I don't eat anyone's pizza," she says brusquely. "Because then they turn around and say Totunno's eats my pizza!"

Patsy Grimaldi has a direct connection to Lombardi's, too. Lancieri was his uncle, and Patsy went to work for him at the East Harlem restaurant at age 13, eventually learning the art of managing the oven. In the late eighties, while Patsy was working as a maitre d' on then-forsorn Old Fulton Street, a 1,500-square-foot former hardware store came up for lease nearby. In 1990, he and Carol opened their very own Patsy's Pizza. Uncle Patsy had died, and his wife now owned the original (though that would soon change), but it doesn't seem to have occurred to Patsy Grimaldi to worry about whether he could call his place that, too.

The new Patsy's was a classic mom-and-pop shop. Every night, Patsy manned the oven. He perfected his technique for throwing flour, too much of which suddenly cools the oven floor and leads to a saggy crust. He deftly shuttled the pies to keep them from burning on a hot spot. And even when he joined Carol to work the dining room, he still made sure to inspect every bubbling pie headed to customers' tables. "People were like, 'Holy shit, this is the real deal,'" Ed Levine remembers. "Patsy was there. His wife was there. He'd go around and smoke



Patsy Grimaldi in front of his new restaurant.

his stogie. And all was right with the world." Aficionados soon began to make pilgrimages to Old Fulton Street. Next came the celebrities: Bill Cosby, Bob Costas, and John Turturro were regulars. Warren Batty called to sweet-talk Carol into saving a table for him and Annette Bening, whom Patsy asked, "So, are you in the movies, too?" In 1995, Patsy and Carol were sued by Frank Brija, who had bought the East Harlem Patsy's. Much legal wrangling ensued, the result of which was that the Brooklyn Patsy's became Grimaldi's. "We went to court, and we spent over \$150,000 on legal

fees," says Carol, who does most of the talking for the couple. Still, the crowds swarmed. As Carol used to say: "A pizza by any other name is still Patsy's." The pizzeria was open six nights a week, and it was rare for both Patsy and Carol not to be there to make sure everything was just so. By 1998, Patsy was 66, and he and Carol were tired. That's when Frank Ciolli came along. "He heard we wanted to sell, and whatever anybody offered us, he'd give us a certain amount more," says Carol. "He said he'd do what we were doing. He sounded good to us."

**CIOLLI CALLS HIMSELF** an investor. "I invest in various businesses that I've found of interest," the 71-year-old says. "I like property and stuff like that." Until he bought Grimaldi's, Ciolli had never been in the restaurant industry, though his wife's family has run Bamonte's in Greenpoint since it started serving classics like clams casino and cheese ravioli in 1900. For him, Grimaldi's was just like any of his other holdings, a business with potential for growth.

It's easy to see why the Grimaldis were drawn to Ciolli. He was a regular at the restaurant and had a no-nonsense New York demeanor. He speaks with a reassuringly thick New York accent and phrases many of his statements as questions, the kind where it's never quite clear whether you are supposed to answer. ("If my neighbor runs out of cheese, what do you think he does?" Pause. "He comes to me and I give him the cheese!")

Patsy and Carol spent about a year showing Ciolli's people the ropes. On weekends, Ciolli would come to their house in Queens for dinner. Ciolli had plans to turn Grimaldi's into a national chain. In 2003, when he established the first Grimaldi's location outside New York, in Scottsdale, Arizona, Patsy traveled west to promote the grand opening. For Patsy, who had recently lost his brother, it was like welcoming a member of the family.

But in time the relationship began to sour. After Ciolli made his last payment, Patsy says, he stopped coming by the house. Patsy continued to drop by the restaurant, but as the months passed he started to feel unwelcome. Finally—no one can remember exactly when—things came to a head during one of Patsy's regular inspections of Grimaldi's kitchen. "That's not the way I trained you to make pizza," he said to a cook, exasperated. "Why do you make it like this?"

"Look, you're not (Continued on page 110)

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF PATSY GRIMALDI (GRIMALDI); DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN/IN/IN DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES (TOTONNO'S FIRE); HANNAH WHITAKER/NEW YORK MAGAZINE (STILL LIFE)

**A Pie Divided**

New York's feuding pizza dynasties.

	<p><b>1924</b> Founded by Anthony "Totunno" Pero, former Lombardi's pizza-maker</p>		<p><b>1940s-1994</b> Ownership changes hands three times, all within the family.</p>		<p><b>1994</b> Gennaro "Jerry" Pero, Anthony's son and a former owner, dies.</p>		<p><b>2009</b> A fire burns the original Coney Island pizzeria. It gets rebuilt and reopens less than a year later and today is the only Totunno's still open.</p>	<b>1</b>	
	<p><b>1929</b> Opened by John Sasso, who was trained by Lombardi.</p>		<p><b>1947</b> Sasso's nephews Augustine and Patrick Vesce take over the business.</p>		<p><b>1970s-1980s</b> Ownership changes hands two more times, all within the family.</p>		<p><b>1984-2008</b> John's opens up two additional restaurants in Manhattan and one in Jersey City.</p>	<b>4</b>	
	<p><b>1933</b> Pasquale "Patsy" Lancieri, who briefly worked at Lombardi's, opens Patsy's in East Harlem with wife Carmella.</p>		<p><b>1974</b> Lancieri passes away.</p>		<p><b>1991</b> Carmella sells the East Harlem pizzeria to longtime employees John Brecevich and Frank Brija.</p>		<p><b>1995</b> Brecevich and Brija license the Patsy's name to Nick Tsoulos. Six other Patsy's have opened in Manhattan since then.</p>	<b>7</b>	
	<p><b>1941</b> A teenage Patsy Grimaldi starts making pies at his uncle Patsy Lancieri's restaurant.</p>		<p><b>1990</b> Grimaldi opens his own coal-oven pizzeria in Brooklyn at 19 Old Fulton Street and calls it Patsy's.</p>		<p><b>Mid-1990s</b> Brija takes Grimaldi to court over name licensing, resulting in Grimaldi's rechristening his pizzeria after his last name.</p>		<p><b>1998</b> Grimaldi sells the restaurant to Frank Ciolli but stays on as a sometime consultant. Over time, Ciolli opens 32 out-of-state locations and four New York locations.</p>	<b>36</b>	
								<p><b>2011</b> Landlord disputes and rent problems force Ciolli to relocate to One Front Street.</p> <p><b>2011</b> Patsy and Carol Grimaldi decide to open a new pizzeria called Juliana's, named after Patsy's late mother, in the original Fulton Street location, reuniting him with his coal oven. —JULIE MA</p>	

my boss anymore," the cook answered testily.

Patsy left in a huff—he wouldn't stand to be disrespected in the pizzeria he built. The Ciolli clan counters that he had become a disruptive presence—"you know, a scudge"—and that they had no choice but to ask him to stay away. Whatever the case, it was the last time Patsy set foot in Grimaldi's. "You know, it's like marrying your daughter off," says Carol. "You think the guy is okay. But it turns out not to be a great marriage."

Over the years, Patsy tried to forget the slight. He busied himself with annual trips to Italy and doting on his grandchildren. He became a rescuer of cats. (He currently has eleven in his house in Rego Park and eight more that live in the garage.) And he and Carol stayed up on the city's pizza scene. In places where his legend remained undiminished, he would weigh in on technique and ingredients. When Lucali opened in Carroll Gardens, for example, he suggested that Mark Iacono cook his sauce for less time—it's a pizza, not a Sunday gravy—and, says Carol, "it's much better now." Patsy was out of the business, but he still saw himself as the guardian of real New York pizza. "My husband, he's a terrible critic," says Carol. "He bursts at the seams to tell them what they are doing wrong. But I don't let him. What's the sense? They think they know what they're doing. And they don't."

Gina Peluso, Ciolli's 42-year-old stepdaughter, manages the Grimaldi's flagship. She's also her family's unofficial spokeswoman. She chalks up Patsy's relentless criticism to his own regrets and his comeback to simple revenge. "He wasn't the pizza king—you know what I'm saying?" Peluso says. "Instead of being happy at what he created, I think he became bitter at the fact that he couldn't do what my stepdad did."

**WHAT CIOLLI DID**, specifically, was transform Grimaldi's from a critically acclaimed local pizzeria into a restaurant empire with a tourist-heavy clientele and 36 U.S. outlets, from the Vegas strip to Palm Beach. When the Food Network's Giada DiLaurentis is filmed stopping for pizza in New York, it's at Grimaldi's. When Michelle Obama wants to prove that she doesn't only eat organic kale, she takes the kids to Grimaldi's. "We're international," Ciolli says. "And there are very few places with international reputations. McDonald's is international. Pizza Hut is maybe international. They have stores everywhere. But people don't come here to eat at Pizza Hut."

As Grimaldi's brand recognition surged, however, complaints about the quality of its

pizza spread. Connoisseurs who once happily endured the long line have mostly stopped coming. Grimaldi's Zagat rating has dipped. Once a fixture on the guide's perennial top-pizza list, Grimaldi's has for the past three years failed to receive even an honorable mention.

Starting around 2005, Ciolli also found himself embroiled in a legal battle with his landlord. The troubles, zealously reported everywhere from the broadsheets to pizza blogs, can be summed up like this: The landlord, Dorothy Waxman, and her son, Mark, complained that Ciolli was regularly late with his rent and delinquent in paying city taxes and utility bills; in 2010, after years of bickering, Ciolli and the Waxmans signed a so-called stipulation agreement that gave the landlords the right to immediately evict should their tenant pay late—which Ciolli did the very next month. Ciolli, in turn, alleges that the Waxmans were determined to toss him out for spite. He sued Waxman, claiming a conspiracy to steal his business and seeking millions in damages; Waxman countersued for defamation.

Patsy followed the operatic twists in the press and saw an opportunity. Now liberated from the noncompetitor clause in the Grimaldi's sale contract, he and Carol had already begun looking for a space to open a new pizzeria. He called Mark Waxman and asked if he would take him back. Waxman, who wound up becoming a limited partner in Juliana's, says he had been fielding a host of offers from would-be tenants but chose the Grimaldis because they were a known quantity and because he reveled in the idea of giving them a second chance.

Ciolli, meanwhile, found a bigger space just a few doors down, at One Front Street, and only had to shut down for a couple of days while making the move last fall. Even on the coldest days, the restaurant had its usual line stretching down the block. But any chance of the new Grimaldi's peacefully coexisting with Juliana's was long gone. Just days before Ciolli's lease expired at 19 Old Fulton Street, his 39-year-old son died of a heart attack while working out. In what Patsy and Carol say was a mark of respect, the couple attended his wake. "I just looked at them and said, 'Really? Like, really?'" says Peluso. "It's like a *Sopranos* episode. You come in, shake their hands, and then you shoot them in the head the next day."

**AS PATSY AND CAROL** prepared to open Juliana's, meeting with architects and taste-testing various imported-tomato options, they seemed at pains not to inflame their relationship with Ciolli. Carol kept her barbs secondhand: "Wherever we go, we

hear from people, 'It's just not the same.' Last week, someone came running at me and she hugged me and kissed me and said, 'Are you coming back? When we saw what he was doing, we kept saying, Mr. and Mrs. Grimaldi'—what was the word she used?—'what that's doing to the Grimaldis' name, it's a disgrace.' But I don't want to throw any more rocks."

Only once, during an after-lunch espresso in February, did Patsy take a swipe at his competitor. "I had a nice relationship with him. He promised he was going to do the right thing. And he never did."

"All right. Let's drop it," said Carol. "Let's try not to talk about it. Frank can stay there, and he can do what he wants. And we don't want any trouble with him."

The feeling was apparently not entirely mutual. In September, only weeks before Juliana's was slated to open, Ciolli filed his motion to prohibit Patsy and Carol from operating a pizza business at 19 Old Fulton Street. Ciolli argued that the \$500,000 he paid for the Grimaldi's business gave him ownership not just of its furniture and famed coal oven but also its "commercial goodwill."

Patsy tends to think of the business in less transactional terms. Ask him who in the city makes a proper pizza these days, and he will shrug and answer: "They all died." By "they" he means guys like his uncle Patsy, Totono's Anthony Pero, and Amerigo Coppolla of Amerigo's in the Bronx. Juliana's, he hopes, will restore coal-oven pies to their rightful place in the New York scene.

At his age, Patsy knows he won't be able to make, or even supervise, every pie that comes out of the oven for long. But if sling-dough is something you can teach, inculcating unwavering commitment to the old methods is something else—something Patsy has already learned once the hard way. This time, Patsy and Carol have put their trust in Matt Grogan, a former investment banker, who began coming to Grimaldi's when it first opened in 1990 and has stayed close to the couple ever since. Unlike Ciolli, Grogan is a pizza nerd, well versed in the city's pizza history and with appropriate respect for a great New York pie. ("If he could live on pizza, he would," says Carol approvingly.) The Grimaldis are counting on Grogan to learn everything that Patsy knows, so that he can impart Patsy's technique and passion to cooks in Brooklyn and, perhaps one day, at Juliana's in Connecticut, Long Island, and New Jersey, too. But if the restaurant never quite takes off like that, it can still accomplish something else: allowing the couple to finish out their days eating pizza they deem worthy. "We'll be there," says Carol. "We haven't had a good pizza since he left." ■